

The Same Place You Get Your Dreams

Stan Nicholls talks to Katharine Kerr

“‘Female fantasy writer’ has become a form of insult in some quarters,” claims Katharine Kerr. “It’s the sneer that gets launched at people like me by the hard sf writers. Good, clean, male science fiction is considered the reverse of the fantasy coin, and desirable. I don’t know how that happened, and I’m really sorry it has, because it’s nonsense.

“There are some very good women writers of hard science fiction and some very good male writers of fantasy. But in terms of sales the fantasy writers who really rake in the bucks are mostly male – David Eddings, Terry Brooks, Stephen Donaldson, Terry Pratchett, Tolkien, of course – and their audience is generally boys and young men from about 15 to 25. Women fantasy writers in America don’t get the promotion and the advances that men do.

“So the only thing I can think of is that the authors who label fantasy as female and do not like fantasy writing also consider the word ‘female’ an insult. Anything female is bad, right? Of course when you confront them with that they deny it. But I’m afraid the subtext tells a different story.”

No doubt this is true. But most sf writers who dislike fantasy do not cite gender, they point to the genre’s supposed lack of scientific rigour. “It’s not true that fantasy lacks rationality,” Kerr contends. “For example, Tolkien’s world is extremely logical, and his magicians work upon themselves, not the physical world. Gandalf is who he is because he’s a man of supreme self-control.

“My books are always as logical as I can make them. The magic used in my worlds, for example, is the kind of Cabalistic, Rosicrucian magic that was practised by Dr

John Dee, or the Golden Dawn order that W.B. Yeats belonged to. It’s rooted in the Hermetic tradition. I’ve taken out the Christian elements, because they don’t belong in my created worlds, and just used that magic, which gives you a logical basis. Magic that is inward-oriented, that has a psychology, has its own logic. It is super-logical, if you wish to call it that, or non-logical. But *illogical* it is not.

“The thing about a lot of these hard science-fiction critics is that they don’t read your books but still presume to judge you. Their model is the Terry Brooks ‘Sword of Shannara’ series. They think fantasy is all Tolkien rip-offs like that one. But you can’t argue with them. You just walk away.”

The reason behind some sf people’s hostility toward fantasy, she adds, may be resentment. “They don’t like the fact that fantasy is the oldest form of literature and science fiction is just a new twist on it.

“So much modern science fiction is fantasy when you think about it. Take faster-than-light travel. Faster-than-light travel is not an engineering problem, it is a reality problem. I’ve never heard of a physicist who wanted to challenge Einstein’s central thesis that nothing goes faster than light. So the minute you have a novel with faster-than-light travel, you’ve blown it. You’re in the land of fantasy. I mean, get off it, buddy. There’s nothing *real* about this.”

She has written a science-fiction novel herself, *Polar City Blues*, which she says strengthens rather than contradicts her case. Because it’s all fantasy, right? “Right. And in many ways there are thematic links between my fantasy novels and *Polar City*

Blues. They both centre around strong women characters, for instance.

“*Polar City* was conceived in a very interesting way. I had a terrible bout of bronchitis. I was feverish and couldn’t do anything but lie down. While I was lying there I got a sort of fever vision of the planet on which *Polar City* was set. I developed that image into a novel during the two weeks or so I was sick, and when I got over being sick the novel was basically written.”

Tapping the unconscious like this, although usually in a less troublesome way, is her key to creativity. “When people ask me, ‘Where do you get your ideas?’ I always say, ‘From the same place you get your dreams.’ Because the unconscious mind is always taking in data and knows everything you’re doing. I think there’s something about the human mind that impels us to produce stories. And we learn about the world by telling stories. When you hear a small child saying, ‘I’m sitting on the floor and here’s my dolly,’ what they’re doing is making a narrative out of their sensory experience. That’s one of the basic things the human mind does.

“We could even say that each of our personalities is a story we tell about ourselves. We select the memories that go into that personality, and it’s to some extent fictional, because the view we have of ourselves may not be the same one other people do. Indeed there are people who think much worse of themselves, so it’s not just ego or vanity; their narrative’s been conditioned by some terrible experience.

“So when you write, what you do is learn how to pierce that veil which keeps the unconscious stuff unconscious. You train yourself to let the veil part so that things can

partial bibliography. From the start the book confused me. In a short time I was totally mystified. Where were the giants of the field I knew so well? Where were the famous Asimov, Clarke, Herbert, whose names even casual readers could prattle off? Where were the stalwarts more likely to be familiar mostly to fans, such as van Vogt, Harness, Anderson, Williamson and the rest, who had done so much to guide my youth? I could not find a single name known to me anywhere in the book. It was as though the great golden age of the genre had been filled with different people altogether. The most popular science-fiction writers, I read, were John Verwood and Aleistair MacAdam – the latter’s future history series, under the collective title of “The Jovian Empire,” was especially praised. Even the marvellous formative magazines, *Astounding*, *Startling Stories*, *Super Science Stories*, *Planet*, and all the others, had been replaced. By *Ultimate Science Fiction* (which, under the editorship of G.W. Harding, sound like an analogue of *Astounding*), *Incredible Stories*, *Tales of the Infinite*, and so on.

Who could have taken the trouble to invent and publish such a complete yet wholly contrived directory? Musing, I raised my eyes from the book. The clubhouse seemed to have filled while my attention had been taken. A crowd stood near the bar. All were looking towards me, their stares melting sheepishly away as I noticed. All but one, that is. He was a small man in a shabby green jacket, who came walking towards me with awkward movements, his face strained and anxious, breaking into an ingratiating smile as he approached.

“Are you a science-fiction fan?” he asked, nodding to the book.

“Yes.”

He sat down at the table. When he began talking I knew I had met the genuine article. For one thing he did not tackle the subject directly but chatted in general terms, letting me know that he acknowledged that the bond existed. He asked me if I had much of a collection. “I’ve lost most of mine, I’m afraid,” he added sadly. “Never get rid of your collection, man. I could cry over it.”

Then he came to a point he had been shy of broaching. “I write a bit of it too. Actually I’m in this book.” He snatched up the directory, opened it near the beginning, flicked back a couple of pages and laid it down in front of me. I bent to follow his pointing finger. *Barrington J. Bayley*. The name headed a very short entry. I squashed the impulse to ask him his real name; the one he showed me was obviously a pseudonym. Or rather it would have been, had any of the names in the book been of people who really existed.

I scanned the brief, terse description of his trifling contribution to this phantom literature. Pushing the book aside, eyes still downcast, I became suddenly, absolutely certain that a throng of people had gathered around Bayley, and were all looking down on our exchange with avid interest. I looked up quickly. No one was present. There was only the confused press by the bar.

“I didn’t know there was another fan in Donnington,” I said.

He made no answer. I gulped down what was left

of my drink. My adventure was beginning to pall. I felt a need to return to the familiar. “Do you ever go to the Bell?” I asked him.

“The Bell?”

I made a gesture. “The pub over the way.”

“Er, I’m a member here.”

“It’s a pub,” I chuckled, “you don’t have to be a member.”

“Of course not.”

“I’m going there now. Would you like to come along?”

“Will it be all right?”

“Why, you’re of drinking age, aren’t you?” I heaved myself to my feet.

On my way to the door it seemed a wonder to me that the Wendy House could be so crowded with people and still seem vacant, as though there were no more than three or four people in it. Yet when I glanced around me, that was all there was. I went through the door and then looked back to see if Bayley was still with me and had not, like Alan, chosen to retreat without even a polite word. I watched him encounter the step and stumble, nearly falling as though he hadn’t known it was there. Once outside the door he looked about him in bewilderment, like a cat I had once known which had been raised in a flat, and was then introduced to the outdoors for the first time. He looked down the long straight path, and shook his head dolefully.

“I won’t be able to pass the gate.”

Alan had once given his definite opinion that all science-fiction writers are crazy. Bayley’s inane remark was likely part of a story he was framing in his mind. “We don’t have to go through the gate,” I told him. “There’s a secret short cut. Over here.”

His step quickened as I led him on a slanting course across the paddock. But he became fretful when, in the quickly fading light, I had trouble locating the weak spot in the hedge. At last I found the yielding point, testing it with my arm.

“Will I be able to get through?” Bayley asked, in an incredibly anxious voice.

“Come on, it’s all right.” Privet leaves brushed against my face as I forced my way through towards the lane. I reached back and tugged at the sleeve of his shabby green jacket...

For a moment disbelief and lack of self-confidence constrained me; then a hand guided me gently forward by my left arm. Privet leaves brushed against my face as, with a rustling sound, I pushed my way through and stood alone in the now shadowed, darkened lane. Ahead, a lighted pub sign glimmered between two beech trees.

It’s understandable, isn’t it? Someone at the nadir of nonexistence, who wants to be real, and to write science fiction? But I haven’t seen Alan since. Either he has finally tired of me and frequents a more distant pub, or as I think, he is in the Wendy House. There has to be some sort of exchange, surely, to keep the cosmic balance?

I am not a member there, of course. And so I trudged on to the Bell, to swallow some pints of Tetley’s bitter and disdain the yokels. ●